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RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000019

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STATE FOR EAP/CM, DRL/IRF AND G/STC
BANGKOK FOR USAID/MSTIEVATER AND SKISSINGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/22/2027
TAGS: SOCI EAID PGOV PHUM SCUL TBIO CH
SUBJECT: GAY AND LESBIAN CHENGDU

REF: 05 CHENGDU 620

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CLASSIFIED BY: James Boughner, Acting Consul General, Chengdu,
Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) Summary. Although Chengdu has been nicknamed "gay paradise," gays here still face considerable challenges, and official, social, and family pressures are often sufficiently intense to keep many local gays in the closet. The situation of lesbians is even more difficult, perhaps due to higher family pressures on young women. Nevertheless, local organizations provide much-needed emotional and psychological support, and the city boasts an active gay and lesbian bar scene. The Consulate is working with one organization to provide AIDS prevention education. End summary.

A VISIT TO A GAY SUPPORT GROUP

¶12. (C) Congenoff recently attended a meeting and party at the Chengdu Young Homosexuals' Activity Center, a facility operated by the Chengdu affiliate of the Beijing-based Aibai organization. Also attending were Aibai Chengdu co-founder Jiang Hua (strictly protect), who had invited Congenoff to the meeting, and about 50 to 60 men. The Center is located in a large walk-up apartment in a downmarket neighborhood of Chengdu, and only small signs at the bottom of the stairway indicated its existence.

¶13. (C) As an icebreaker, the master of ceremonies asked each of the attendees to stand and state his age, occupation, and sexual orientation. Almost all of the attendees were between 16 and 25 years of age, and most were students or recent college graduates. About a third identified themselves as bisexual, while the remainder stated they were exclusively gay. After the introductions were over, the attendees played various Chinese-style games, in which the loser was required to stand and perform some song or act out an assigned role, to the great amusement of the audience. Attendees then mingled informally.

¶14. (C) Asked about official attitudes toward Aibai Chengdu and the Activity Center, Jiang Hua acknowledged that, as an unlicensed organization, the Center faced occasional harassment from police. He said several officers had stopped by recently to ask about the organization, and whether the Center had obtained the official approvals necessary to operate. Jiang Hua said the members told the police (falsely) that the Center was affiliated

with the Bureau of Health, and this seemed to satisfy them at least temporarily. He also stated that, while the Center often posted photographs of its activities on its website, faces of participants were often blanked out to preserve their anonymity.

Another participant volunteered the information that several Aibai members also belonged to the Chinese Communist Party, but were unable to declare their sexual orientation openly. (Note: Jiang Hua said he was a Party member as well. End note.)

¶15. (C) Several participants agreed that Chengdu was a relative "bright spot" for gays in China, with several support organizations, lots of gay bars, and a local culture that was more easygoing and tolerant than other areas of China. Asked about the reasons for this, one attendee volunteered the opinion that the city was historically a target of migration from other parts of China, and that many gays had left their home areas to move there. Others pointed to the city's reputation for leisure and its well-developed nightlife. Asked why all the attendees were male, participants' responses ranged from "China has very few lesbians" to "lesbians don't feel comfortable coming here and openly declaring their orientation."

¶16. (C) Jiang Hua (who is a third year surgical resident) stated he was deeply concerned over the threat to the gay and lesbian community from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In particular, he claimed the incidence of HIV/AIDS in China was on the verge of "exploding," and he also noted with concern recent media reports about the alarming rise of syphilis in China. (Note: Jiang Hua may have been referring to recent data from the China Center for Disease Control (CDC) on the rate of HIV infection among MSM (men who have sex with men), and to a recent report in the British medical magazine "Lancet" on the rise of syphilis in China. Consulate Health Unit personnel have volunteered to address the Chengdu Aibai group on the dangers of STDs. End note.)

A LESBIAN BAR

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¶17. (C) After the Aibai event, Congenoff visited a lesbian bar, in the company of Jiang Hua, his partner, and an American lesbian. The bar was located in an area full of other bars, teahouses, and discos, but bore no sign in Chinese - only a small neon sign with the word "Love" in English. Although the bar was small, it was packed with at least 60-70 women. Most were stylishly dressed, and appeared to be in their 20s and 30s.

Conversation was very animated, with one table participating in a drinking game, another in a kissing game. In the back, couples engaged in more intimate contact.

¶18. (C) The manager of the bar (who did not give her name) told Congenoff the establishment had been in business for over five years, and was currently the oldest bar in Chengdu catering to lesbians. She said it was now the smallest such establishment in the city, and that several other larger lesbian bars existed, offering music and dancing.

¶19. (C) The manager acknowledged (and Congenoff's gay companions agreed wholeheartedly) that the position of lesbians in Chengdu was much more difficult than that of gay men. She said it was much easier for men to move out of their parents' houses and live together without causing suspicion. In addition, she claimed young women faced intense pressure from their families to get married - "if they tell them they're lesbian, their parents say they're just going through a phase" - and that many of her customers were married women. All agreed the situation was even more difficult for lesbians in rural communities, and that family pressures often played a role in decisions to migrate to urban areas.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Even though gays and lesbians in Chengdu may enjoy a more tolerant atmosphere than in some other areas of China, the community still remains largely hidden from the city's "mainstream" society: witness the lack of signs outside advertising the existence of the Activity Center and of the lesbian bar. As a result, pressures on gays and lesbians to keep their orientation secret remain high, and one unfortunate effect may be a lack of knowledge about the transmission and prevention of STDs. Post will continue its health-education outreach efforts to the gay and lesbian community in Chengdu.

BOUGHNER